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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000384

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: IRAN: QODS DAY BECOMES DOMESTIC BATTLEFRONT

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CLASSIFIED BY: Timothy Richardson, Acting Director, Iran Regional Presence Office, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

**¶1.** (C) SUMMARY: This year's Qods Day - traditionally a government-orchestrated display of solidarity with Palestinians - has morphed into a domestic political contest in the wake of the disputed presidential election as oppositionists attempt to co-opt the sanctioned rallies by mobilizing their supporters in a show of strength. The government has countered by substituting a hard-line cleric for the customary Qods Day leader Ayatollah Rafsanjani in order to maintain control of the message and suppress the participation of oppositionists. There are clear indications that the government is fully prepared to violently suppress those who would defy the government's warning. Though some analysts predict that the September 18 event will be a defining moment for the opposition, our contacts have asserted that it is more appropriately viewed as gauge of the opposition's ability to draw supporters back into the streets, particularly given Khatami and Karrubi's publicly declared intent to participate. END SUMMARY.

**¶2.** (C) "International Jerusalem Day" - or Qods Day - was established by Islamic Republic founder Ayatollah Khomeini shortly after the Revolution as an annual expression of popular support for Palestinians and of venting anger toward Israel, cornerstones of Iranian foreign policy rhetoric since 1979. As such, the government strongly encourages, and in some cases compels, participation. Turn-out in Tehran alone typically numbers in the hundreds of thousands. Since Khomeini's death in 1989 until this year, Rafsanjani has traditionally led the annual ceremony from the pulpit at Tehran University.

**¶3.** (C) In keeping with their tactic of using officially sanctioned public events as cover for bringing opposition supporters out in force, the key leaders associated with the "Green Path" opposition - Mousavi, Khatami, Karrubi and Grand Ayatollah Sanei - have all issued calls for massive participation, correctly anticipating that government would not risk losing face by canceling the event as they did with several earlier Ramadan ceremonies. Supreme Leader Khamenei and Ahmadinejad are also exhorting people to attend in an attempt to use the expected large turn-out to claim 'victory' for the system, much as the 85 percent voter participation rate was heralded as a sweeping endorsement of the system.

¶4. (C) Following days of contradictory press reports, Iranian state radio confirmed September 16 that in a break with long-standing tradition, former President and current Expediency Council Chairman Ayatollah Rafsanjani will not lead Qods Day Friday Prayers on September 18. Instead, hardliner Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami (no relation to former President Mohammad Khatami) will deliver the main sermon after opening remarks by President Ahmadinejad. (NOTE: Ahmadinejad has delivered the preliminary remarks on Qods Day at least once before.) This switch indicates that while poised to spin large turn-out in its favor, the ruling clique is trying in actuality to suppress participation of the opposition and maintain control of the message by sidelining Rafsanjani, who is aligned with the reformers.

¶5. (C) Other indications that the government is ready and willing to suppress any large-scale discontent from oppositionists tomorrow include reports that Basij units in the outskirts of Tehran are being mobilized and that sections of Tehran University campus are being cordoned off. In the past twenty-four hours, the Revolutionary Guard and the police have issued a slew of warnings, promising harsh punishments for participants who are caught chanting "improper slogans."

¶6. (C) Many IRPO contacts are viewing Qods Day as a significant indicator of the opposition's ability to muster large-scale, visible support. A prominent oppositionist based in Europe argued that streets full of protesters will not only buoy the movement but have the tangible benefit of preventing the arrest of Mehdi Karroubi. According to a Dubai-based analyst closely aligned with reformers inside Iran, many believe that the government is gearing up to increase repression of its opponents regardless of what transpires September 18.

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¶7. (C) COMMENT: The rhetorical tug-of-war over Qods Day has raised expectations that it could be a defining moment in the political struggle unleashed by the June 12 election. The government's decision to remove Rafsanjani from the equation suggests that Khamenei is well aware of the scale of public discontent and loathe to give the opposition a pretext for massing against the government. Yet the regime has repeatedly proved itself willing to brutally - and effectively - suppress peaceful demonstrators. With the opposition exhorting its supporters to turn out in defiance of the regime's warnings, Qods Day represents an important gauge of the opposition's resonance at the popular level. For the leaders of the movement, the day could prove more fateful. Significant unrest on the streets could give the hardliners agitating for the arrest of the opposition leaders the necessary pretext to make such a move, most likely against Karroubi, who is the most vulnerable and has promised to attend the Qods Day rally. The fact that Rafsanjani will not speak at the main event in Tehran diminishes the likelihood that tomorrow will be a fateful day for his future role in IRIG. END COMMENT.

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